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ABSTRACT

Reading, writing, speech assignments for special education classes, English as a second language and many other classroom projects can be taught through the involvement created by Readers Theatre. Readers Theatre is the presentation of dialogue-type material in play form. The actors hold the script as they move through it and a narrator's voice fills in the details as in a book. The technique is useful for all levels of students needing refined skills in the written, spoken, and non-verbal aspects of a second language. It makes use of the students' enthusiasm for the production and presentation of a script, while circumventing the loss of motivation caused by repetitious drills and deskwork. It encourages the student to write well-organized pieces and to learn new vocabulary and word usage in a meaningful context. Warm-up instructions and examples of illustrations for use with class discussions, storytelling, and scriptmaking are included. (Author/AMH)

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TEACHING THE TOTAL LANGUAGE WITH READERS THEATRE

adapted from the 1978 CATESOL workshop of the same name

written and illustrated by

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Because there's more to language than the spoken word (kinesics, sociological and cultural factors, to name a few), it is both appropriate and important to consider the "internal" aspects of language learning. Knowledge of the complexities of language leads to a higher understanding of different life styles as well as insights into one's own culture.

Readers Theatre is one method which teaches the skill of effective communication, be it spoken, written or read. It can be applied in the Reading class, the Writing class, for teaching English as a Second Language, or for Special Education classes where problems in speech or social interactions are present.

What is Readers Theatre? It is the presentation of dialog-type material in play form. It takes its name from the fact that it allows its actors to hold their scripts in full view of the audience and work from them during the final presentation. It is also dubbed Readers Theatre since a narrator's voice fills in the details as in a book that you are reading. Props are used sparingly, if at all. The presentation is generally done from stools arranged in front of the audience, as in a radio play. Persons who are "offstage" sit with their backs to the audience and swivel to a facing position when they make an entrance. The narrator introduces the characters, sets the scenes, makes side remarks, can enhance the mood created by the actors' dialog or remain apart and dispassionate. The narrator, in other words--when well written or deftly directed--can round out a presentation and create a special intimacy between audience and actor.

Why use it in the Language-oriented classroom? Readers Theatre encompasses aspects of language often neglected in the teaching process. Students can break away from drills or written work and apply the skills they've studied under the guise of "clowning around." The method demands a great amount of repetition (which is good) and elicits this repetition without the resistance usually encountered by the use of pattern and repetition drills. A Readers Theatre unit requires no special equipment or costumes and can be carried out within the confines of the classroom. The diverse nature of the technique actively includes even the most unable of your students with the most accomplished into a single presentation, side by side. Apart from this, the best reason for using Readers Theatre for Reading, Writing, Speech or ESL instruction is that it makes using language a fun experience.

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A few words about Readers Theatre and what it can do for your students. Creating a script and putting on a play can be a very effective way of winding up a unit of study. It will include the vocabulary and grammer points of that unit and show them in a situation your students can understand: A life situation. The emphasis is manyfold, demanding attention to small points of pronunciation as well as the "total effect" of the message being conveyed. The student/actor must use body and face, gestures, grimaces and any other resource to get the point across. This emphasis on the complete internalization of an idea allows a student to feel with the whole body the meaning of the words being said. ESL students tend to forget that they are speaking English --a new and awkward language--and concentrate their attention on making themselves understood. Reading students often find they can perform much better than they think. Some can even be assigned to adapt more stories to the Readers Theatre format. As a Reading teacher, this writer has witnessed students arguing among themselves as to how well they have read their parts. (This incident happened in a group whose test scores were generally below those of the rest of the school and whose attitude toward participation had formerly been one of apathy.)

The teacher can steer the direction of class scripts or rewrite prepared scripts to match the students' language ability. Elements that have been practiced in drills or deskwork can be "sneaked" into the scripts along with vocabulary and punctuation.

Students who cannot read can still take part in this activity because the repetition encountered during rehearsal promotes memorization. The script itself becomes a mnemonic device with which even those students awaiting a turn to talk can follow silently. They will assimilate the appearance of the written word with little coaxing from you. Let it happen as a product of the presentation and don't force it. It is often helpful to underline each person's part in a different color so that nonreaders can simply count the changing of speakers until their part comes up.

The presence of a narrator includes the very difficult narrative voice constructions--so troublesome to many students--and shows very graphically how it fits into the language of conversation.

The technique can be made to serve at any level of ability and gives good examples of composition, punctuation, various verb tenses and structure. It encourages the acquisition of new vocabulary and makes the students feel more confident of their ability to use the language effectively. It teaches culture elements such as proper facial and hand gestures to accompany speech, body posture and appropriate social behavior in a given situation. These elements can make or break an attempt at communication more surely than wrong verb tenses or a misplaced modifier.

The following are techniques which can be tailored to almost any classroom situation. Adapt to meet your own needs.

GETTING THEM STARTED WITH WARM-UPS

Your students will work better together (a) if they feel comfortable with each other and (b) when they know they can handle the material. Here are some exercises that can help to get your students ready for Readers Theatre.

A. Verbal Exchange: Students are paired off. A topic is chosen by the teacher (example topic--"Food"). The first student begins at the signal to name as many words as possible that relate to that topic. The second student listens carefully and when "Switch!" is called by the teacher, that student carries on trying not to repeat anything the first student said.

This exercise requires listening and creative thinking since students will have to search for enough words and a way to relate them to the topic. The time should be short, about thirty seconds to a minute at most, divided between two students. Do this with several topics that relate somehow to the chapter and to the play that you have in mind.

B. Situations: This is a more advanced skill but can be modified to suit your group. This drill incorporates switches of person and the use of compound and complex sentences. The students are again paired off and told to take on the roles of a "situation conversation." Example: One student plays a teenager trying to gain access to the family car. The other plays a parent who under no circumstances will agree to loan the car out. The first student presents a statement (e.g., "I need the car tonight"). The second student will repeat the statement, making the proper changes and presenting a counter-argument ("You need the car tonight but it doesn't have any gas"). The first student then repeats the argument and presents a new one ("The car doesn't have any gas but I could buy some") and so on. This exchange carries on for at least a minute but no longer than two. It is important to let the ideas flow and overlook the errors in usage. The point here is to create the use of language and not perfection. If you must correct a student than do it in the repetition of the idea. Be careful to choose topics and situations that your students will have the vocabulary and expertise to handle.

Either of these activities can occupy the first five minutes of class or be a place to go when things bog down with the play. Always circulate through the classroom and use a lot of side coaching.

USING A PREPARED SCRIPT

Start them out by having selected persons read the parts assigned to them. Then ask the audience to comment on anything they saw that was particularly effective in getting the message across. In previous classroom and workshop situations, I've asked participants--actors and audience alike--how they felt about the topic of the play and what can happen when you are in the situation presented. This evolved into a discussion of the main idea of

the play and how that meaning could be better expressed.

At this point the "teacher" (who gradually became a "director") took one role at a time and modeled it in the most exaggerated manner possible for the student who was reading it. This encouraged the students to expand on the elements which had been alluded to, but not fully developed, in the prior performance. The teacher/director was careful to commend aspects of the presentation that the students did well and urged the class to build on those aspects, prompting each actor to identify with the character and internalize the part. After these points had been reviewed, the students were asked to try the play once more, this time with more feeling and realism. The second performance showed much more awareness of their placement in front of the audience and brought out the kind of actions, gestures and voice quality that fit the script.

Many suggestions were forwarded by those in the play and those watching. Some suggested a sound effects person to play the part of the objects to which the players were referring, adding the appropriate noises. Another suggestion was to include more players to represent certain inanimate objects in the script--a "tree," for example. The part is nonspeaking, but still a chance to participate. If your students want to add elements, let them.

During the discussion period it was also mentioned that some speakers had large, complicated parts while others hardly spoke at all. Nonetheless, the entire group felt that they all had been included and could recall their parts from memory.

In a classroom situation this activity does not necessarily happen in one class period. First the students must learn what is expected of them and what the process is. Then they need to have a chance to become familiar with the script and to determine the meaning of the words, phrases and general idea of the material. They will need time to practice and discuss what they are doing. All of this could become an activity that occupies the last twenty minutes of the class for a week or more. You may begin to notice that they are reluctant to stop working on it. Good.

WRITING YOUR OWN SCRIPTS

While it is advisable to teach the technique of Readers Theatre using a prepared script, you will probably find it more expedient to your teaching to write your own scripts once the students understand what it is all about. The first and foremost reason for using scripts made in class is that they allow the students to work with material that makes sense to them and is relevant to their experience. Since we are attempting to show how to get a message across effectively, it might as well be a message that is important to them. The second reason is that it is not always possible to find graded materials to suit the reading ability and speaking patterns of your particular group. All to often, commercial materials are not suited to the level

of communication skills on which your students need to work. A third reason for having students write the scripts is that it builds up the instructor's files.

Since the topics and the words are ones that students construct, they are more likely to understand them. It also helps bring the real world into the classroom by letting the students tell you what they need help in saying.

How do you start? We began with pictures from various magazines, newspapers, books and comic strips (see examples at the end of this article). You can also start with situations the students bring into the class. If a student has a particular recurring problem (as is often the case in a foreign language class), you can create a script of it in which several solutions can be explored. Any issue that interests the students can be used.

In our group, a picture was chosen that seemed interesting to most of the group. (In this instance the stimulus picture turned out to be a two-panel cartoon strip with the word balloons whited out.) We discussed who the characters were, their ages, occupations, what they appeared to be doing and what they might be saying. Cuing off the picture, it was asked if anyone had similar things happen to them and what they did. We imagined what we would do in a similar situation. Finally, after establishing all names and whatever terminology might be needed, a student was asked to summarize a possible outcome of the picture. (In an ESL class you would pick one of your better students for this.) The teacher then asked for specific dialog, and wrote selected responses on the board in the form of a playscript. Between these entries of dialog material on the board, the teacher asked how a character would say a given statement, and what they were feeling and doing while saying it. These "How" and "What" items were written into the script as the part of the Narrator. Often, if the Narrator's part becomes extensive, it is a good idea to divide it between two actors, or even assign a narrator for each character. In our case, one narrator proved sufficient for the entire production.

While the narrative and dialog material is being written on the board, assign as many students as there are characters to copy on paper what you have written. When the play on the board is completed, you not only have the exact number of handwritten scripts you need, but you also have the students to give the premier read-through. After the first read-through, use the suggestions set down in the USING A PREPARED SCRIPT section.

The teacher/director is responsible for guiding the entire presentation: Selection, rehearsal and performance. The instructor has the final say on the wording and structure so that the students have complete mastery of content and speaking level.

As the students become better at this activity, they can be left on their own with the teacher serving only as a final check, allowing for several different productions in the making at the same time in the same room.

Below are two examples of cartoons which can be used to stimulate question-and-answer activities and to elicit situation and dialog material from your class. The topmost cartoon was used in the class session mentioned in this article.

As to the drawing below, what's the celebration about? Who is it for? Are you sure? How does the sitting girl feel about the boy? How do you know? Think of other questions for your students and have them write their own one, two and three paragraph descriptions of the picture. Writings lead to scripts, and scripts lead to plays. Have a good performance.